



Pickled Turnips and Fermented Tofu

by Shu Mei-yan, a winner of “Read to Discover” contest

Zhong He Junior High School, Seventh Grade, Yanjiang County, Ziyang City, Sichuan Province

Advising Teacher: Zhu Bofeng

ARSL Sponsor: Wang Yun-wu

Translated by ESS volunteer Bella Li

“Beep, beep...” Buses lined up like a long dragon outside the school gate, waiting to take us home. There was cheering everywhere in the schoolyard. Not able to hold back my excitement, I packed my things and ran to one of the buses, not even bothering to call my parents with the news of my homecoming. While waiting with my buddies, I started to chat. “Whenever I go home, I always enjoy delicious meals. My parents often call to urge me to eat well. They say they are eating real well at home.” My stomach was about to wage a revolt against the plain meals in school. At the thought of the plump drumsticks, tender fresh fish and crispy roast duck that I enjoyed at home, my mouth watered and I started to drool. I kept on babbling and punctuated my account of the sumptuous meals with exaggerated hand gestures, and my schoolmates burst into laughter.

“So, you live real well. What do your parents do?” the driver teased me.

“Well...both my Dad and Ma are physicians,” I offered. In fact, my parents are down to earth peasants. Since I had been telling my schoolmates the lie about my parents’ profession all along, I had to perpetuate my story. I felt a flicker of uneasiness while doing this. Yet, when I saw the look of admiration on my schoolmates’ faces, I felt a sense of rising pride. I started to hum my favorite tune while I looked forward to the rich homecoming feast...

When I got home, from a distance, I saw my parents having their meal in the house. I shouted out loud; “Dad, Ma, I am back!” My Ma ran to me, took the backpack from me, tried to wipe the dust off me with her hand.

“Didn’t I ask you to call me before coming home? How come you forgot?” my Ma complained.

“I wanted to surprise you. Ma, I am hungry. Where is the food? I can eat a horse! I am tired of the food at school.” I chattered on and dashed to the table.

Dad hurried the dishes into the cabinet, wiped his mouth and said, “I’ll cook up something good real quick!” Quickly he disappeared into the kitchen.

I looked at Ma naughtily and said, “Let me guess, which yummy dishes are you having today?” I opened the cabinet, expecting to see the drumsticks and roast duck, and swallowed a bit of drool. “1, 2, 3! Open my eyes!” The moment I opened my eyes, I was dumbfounded. Inside the cabinet, I was staring down at a bowl of dried up, pickled turnips and half a bowl of blackened and salty fermented tofu. There was nothing else. Instantly, I felt my heart tighten. I was sorry and felt ashamed of myself. At the sight of the pickled turnips and fermented tofu, which was in total contrast with the memory of the sumptuous feast that greeted me each time I came home, I finally understood why my parents wanted me to call them ahead of time. My surprise visit helped me to realize the kind of meal they served themselves everyday

in order to afford the delicious homecoming feast for me. My heart skipped a beat, and my breath became short. Why wasn't I as nice and frugal as my parents? Why didn't I have the decency to admit that I was a daughter of peasants? I looked up at Ma; she was standing there, the corner of her mouth quivering, trying to say something but holding back finally. I walked up to her. Holding her hand, we entered the kitchen. Dad was busy. He had prepared a bowl of sunny side up fried eggs. I asked Dad to sit down at the table and wait. Quickly, I divided the eggs into two large portions and one small portion. I served the two large portions to Dad and Ma and kept the small portion for myself. I had a lot of the pickled turnips and fermented tofu during that meal.

I also made a decision: When I return to school, at the right moment, I shall tell my schoolmates that I am a daughter of peasants! That I love my peasant Dad and my peasant Ma very much!